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# NOTES ON A SEASON'S MUSIC

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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## I.

WE have heard it said by naïvely flamboyant souls that New York is "the musical Mecca of the world." Well, allowing for certain obvious qualifications which it would be tedious to recite, that is now substantially true. Sooner or later, the European sovereigns of the tonal kingdom—fiddlers and pianists, conductors and singers—journey to this alien capital, and, if they see a chance to make sufficient profit, they become naturalized and remain to dwell among us, bravely subduing their ineffable contempt for us by a determined contemplation of their mounting bank-accounts, and an appreciative observation of the worth of the dollar as against the worth of the lira, the franc, the florin, the ruble, the peseta, and the mark. And where the sovereigns of music dwell, thither flock the worshippers—to lose themselves in wonder, love, and praise at the feet of the businesslike ladies and gentlemen who are willing, for a consideration, to cast their pearls before the herds of this modern country of the Gadarenes—which, for those keen-eyed foreigners, is still, as in former days, upon "the other side of the sea."

It is an ancient comedy, of course, and those who observe its perennial reënactment—the unabated (but tactfully suppressed) contemptuousness of the dispensers of aesthetic largesse, and the ecstatic caperings of the herd—would be wasting their energies if they should view it with any emotion more exhausting than a resigned and melancholy humor. We mention the phenomenon only to make clear once more why it is that so much of the excellence of New York's music-making is a matter of the performer and the performance, rather than of the thing performed. It is still possible, for example—indeed, it is the easiest thing in the

world—for the Metropolitan Opera House to ignore, as it has ignored year after year, that work of extraordinary genius which competent opinion has agreed to regard as the most distinguished music-drama composed since the death of Wagner. If the Metropolitan wishes to add to its French répertoire, it need not concern itself with the difficult best: it need only reach out languidly and gather in—*L'Oiseau Bleu*. What if *Pelléas et Mélisande* is available? What if *Louise* is available? What if *L'Heure Espagnol* is available? What if Ernest Bloch's remarkable *Macbeth* is still unknown outside of Paris? If the Russian répertoire needs expansion, the Metropolitan need not seek to acquire Stravinsky's incomparable *Rossignol*; the banal *Eugene Oniegin* of Tchaikovsky will suffice. Why will it suffice? Because, so long as the Metropolitan has Mr. Caruso (and, less consequentially, Mrs. Tellegen) it need not seriously bestir itself about the rest of its répertoire. Anything will do.

Hence the question asked, year after year, by a certain disconsolate few,—Why does the Metropolitan so often choose third-rate or fourth-rate operas, when first-rate ones are available?—is easily answered. The Metropolitan need not put itself to the trouble of seeking and acquiring works of the first class, because it does not have to. There is no compelling public demand for the best music, but only for illustrious and exciting artists. If, for one reason or another, it seems expedient and rewarding to offer *Zaza* or *La Juive*, why should the Metropolitan concern itself with *Pelléas* or *Louise*? If the public can count upon hearing Mr. Caruso and Mrs. Tellegen, it is wholly satisfied. Not only is it indifferent to the particular vehicles used by those charmers, but it is amiable about the constitution of that negligible part of the répertoire which does not employ them. If it can observe Mrs. Tellegen emotionalizing in the shoddy and worthless *Zaza* on the first Friday of the month, and Mr. Caruso stirring the ancient dust of *La Juive* on the second Friday, it will stomach *L'Oiseau Bleu* on the third Friday without complaint. It is not greedy. If it can have Mr. Caruso, Paris and Lexington Avenue may keep *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Thus it happens that the Metropolitan seasons have resolved themselves, for the most part, into devices for exhibiting Mr. Caruso (or Mrs. Tellegen) and lazy apolo-

gies for withholding them. The devices are easily achieved; the apologies suffice.

That chronically disrespectful observer, Mr. William James Henderson, pointing out in the *Sun-Herald* that the unspeakable Leoncavallo "enjoyed eighteen performances with only two operas, *Pagliacci* and *Zaza*," observes: "Shall we not grasp something of the great open secret?" We shall indeed: for, as is known to all, Mr. Caruso sublimated the one and Mrs. Tellegen the other. In view of that momentous fact, an enumeration of the season's additions to the Metropolitan list falls into its due position of bottomless unimportance. But, to point our moral and adorn our sorrowful tale, let us name them: There were four "novelties": *Zaza*, *L'Oiseau Bleu*, *Eugene Oniegin* and *Cleopatra's Night*. There were four "revivals": *La Juive*, *Manon*, *L'Italiana in Algeri* and *Parsifal*. Concerning these refreshments of the répertoire, it may be said briefly that the "novelties" (Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Oniegin* is a toddler of forty-two) are, without exception, works of the fourth or fifth class, and that of the "revivals", two are irremediably antiquated, one is a charming specimen of the operatic *bon-bon* school, and one is among the treasures of the world's art.

The Metropolitan gave seven performances of *Zaza*. But it also gave six performances of *Parsifal*, and for that, much will be forgiven it—even, let us dare to say, *Zaza*. The sagacious and diplomatic Gatti-Casazza not only set up once more within our holy temple of operatic art the holy temple of the Grail, but also, with exquisite Latin courtesy, he made public avowal of his conviction that Wagner, after all, was a very pretty fellow in his day—that he was even capable, perhaps, of enduring the sunlight of a modernity which is irradiated by the genius of Puccini and Rabaud and Albert Wolff.

"Let us say, in no uncertain tone," resolutely affirmed Mr. Gatti-Casazza in a statement to his patrons, "that no war, no human stupidity, no contumacy, can obscure the fact that Richard Wagner created a new musical world which no force ever can destroy or depreciate—a world which exists for the enjoyment of lovers of the theatre and for the life of the theatre itself. . . . If one considers the combination of gifts with which he was endowed, and the result which he succeeded in achieving, beyond all

doubt Wagner was the greatest man that the theatre ever produced. . . . The Metropolitan Opera House was the first to receive *Parsifal* outside its place of origin. This great mystic drama, which ends with the descent from Heaven of the white dove, returns for presentation as if it were a symbol of peace to men of good will.

"It will not be performed either as a social or religious function; no, but as a function truly artistic, and it will evoke emotions profound and pure, such as the rarest scenic-musical spectacles can possibly awaken.

"The life of the Director of a theatre is so infrequent in veritable artistic enjoyment that no hypocritical reason can prevent me from sincerely manifesting my great pleasure in an event so splendid, and of applying to Richard Wagner the invitation of Dante:—

Onorate l'altissimo Poeta!"

. . . . .

Happily said, and possessing the subordinate virtue of verity. And so, thus graciously chaperoned by one whose contrateutonism was above suspicion, *Parsifal* and his healing spear returned to town. He is not quite the Pure Fool of old. He conveys to us less the atmosphere of Monsalvat than of Muncie, Indiana. He lacks elevation and distinction and imagination, and he walks through a scenic world that suggests Alaska and Asbury Park rather than the mellow quietudes of Monsalvat and the sensuous luxuriance of Klingsor's enchanted houri-land. But the marvelous music is there to compensate every insufficiency and extenuate every ineptitude by its sufficing and inexhaustible beauty.

## II.

If the Metropolitan is justly to be wept over for its sins of omission, the visiting Chicago company was equally culpable for its sins of commission. The Chicago organization has an amazing répertoire—a répertoire that stretches from *Pelléas et Mélisande* to *Dinorah*, and exhibits along that almost measureless route such excellent refuges as *L'Heure Espagnol* of Ravel, Montemezzi's *La Nave*, and John Alden Carpenter's delightful *Birthday of the Infanta*. It possesses the incredible Miss Garden, and Rosa Raisa, and Amelita

Galli-Curci—to utter only a few of the most plangent names. But its performances have fallen upon evil days since the death of Mr. Campanini; many of them have become almost unendurable by reason of their crudity and roughness and incoördination. Even the company's supreme artistic card, the *Pelléas* production, tends to decline almost into frustration because of the mishandling of the insensitive bungler who conducts it. Mr. Campanini cannot, alas, be raised from the grave; but the New York performances of the Chicago company must be raised out of the rut of carelessness and perfunctoriness and ineptitude into which they have fallen, if the directors wish to hold the respect of those who are not to be appeased by the Bashanism of Mr. Ruffo or the excitement of waiting to hear if Mme. Galli-Curci is going to sing off the key. It is too much to ask of Miss Garden and Miss Raisa and Mr. Dufranne and other comforting artists among the organization that they should generously compensate for all the aesthetic sins permitted by those who now misdirect the Chicago Opera Company.

### III.

Outside of the two opera houses there was, of course, a torrential flood of music-making, yet it bore to us surprisingly little that was both new and important. We discussed some months ago in these pages Mr. Walter Damrosch's production of Vincent d'Indy's Symphony, *De Bello Gallico*, Mr. Stokowski's exploration of Michel Dvorsky's *Haunted Castle* (now leased by Joseph Hofmann) at a concert of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and certain adventures in pursuit of novelty by Mr. Stransky and the Philharmonic. The concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra yielded us, further, Rachmaninoff's choral symphony, *The Bells*, concerning which we shall content ourselves by remarking that Mr. Rachmaninoff is an admirable pianist. Mr. Carpenter's symphony, *Sermons in Stones*, expounded by Mr. Damrosch, was, alas, unheard by this deponent. Mr. Bodanzky and his new orchestra—to be known henceforth as the National Symphony—played only one work unfamiliar to this capital: a set of variations by that Russian composer who is (or was: there is a vaporous legend of his death) Rimsky-Korsakoff's son-in-law, Maximilian Steinberg. It was worthy music, but it unsettled no complacencies and

troubled no preconceptions. The unfortunate Boston Symphony Orchestra, up to its patrician neck in tribulations, and worn to a shadow of its former self, has continued with desperate bravery to give concerts. Prior to the revolution in its ranks, it made known to New York an admirable score, *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*, by the lamented Charles T. Griffes, who died just as his sincere and finely-grained music had begun to win a belated recognition. Mr. Griffes was a creator who uttered his own thoughts, who looked out upon the world from a hilltop that he himself had discovered. He was a poet with a sense of comedy. He was neither smug nor pretentious. A fastidious craftsman, a scrupulous artist, he went his own way, modestly but unswervingly. Incidentally, he was an American. His loss is deplorable. Many among his confrères could be better spared.

#### IV.

The outstanding feature of the musical season has been the triumphant return of Wagner to his kingdom—not yet (save for *Parsifal*) in the opera house, but in the concert-room. Mr. Damrosch, Mr. Stransky, Mr. Monteux, Mr. Bodanzky, must have agreed in anticipation with those wise and sane words of General Mangin, of the French Army, spoken at Paris a few months ago: "So far as I am concerned, I fail to see that music has anything to do with patriotism. The repugnance which we have known toward German art must disappear. I am not shocked when I hear Wagner's music, and I can still appreciate the works of Goethe." A year ago Sir Thomas Beecham gave *Walküre* in Manchester, as he had given *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* before that. We in America have thus far achieved only *Parsifal*. But our concert-going public, like that of Paris (which recently declared by referendum its desire for Wagner) has clamored with an irresistible voice for the music of that supreme magician of the orchestra. Wagner—Wagner the virulent anti-Prussian, the revolutionist of 1848—has overwhelmingly come back to our concert-rooms, and "the mighty marching and the golden burning" of his music have swept across the season's programmes like a renovating wind.

There are in music two transcendent masters of beautiful speech. One of them knew the secret of a loveliness so

searching and exquisite and unflawed that the marvel of it wears an almost supermundane cast. The other made of his music a blazing pillar of fire—a thing so incandescent and unquenchable that every other flame that had shone before it seemed, for a time, a little dulled. Debussy we have had constantly with us through the dark pain of recent years; Wagner we have now recovered.

His ultimate place is really, after all, in the concert-room rather than the opera-house. We conceive him not primarily as a master of stage-effect through music, but as an acute and absorbed interpreter of the human heart—of its emotional and spiritual conflicts, and of the natural backgrounds, splendid or terrible, against which are projected those passionate silhouettes. His cumbrous and overloaded dramas will probably endure only by virtue of the incomparable music for which they were the excuse—that wonderful tonal flood which streamed inexhaustibly for a quarter of a century, from *Rheingold* to *Parsifal*. Nothing can dim the glory of Wagner the weaver of tones. His place is unique among the Olympians, where he sits, one fancies, apart—a little homesick for that distant moon, the Earth, but measurably consoled, no doubt, by the realization (which he would be the last to discount) that he had left to mankind the greatest music in the world.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.